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**Report of the
School Panel Review of the
Solomon Lewenberg Middle School, Boston, MA**

INTRODUCTION

The purpose of the School Panel Review Process is to assist the Commissioner of Education in determining whether State intervention is needed to guide improvement efforts in schools where students' MCAS performance is critically low and no trend toward improved student performance is evident from MCAS data. The Solomon Lewenberg Middle School was one of twelve Massachusetts middle schools meeting this criterion that were selected for panel reviews in spring, 2001. The Panel Review of the Solomon Lewenberg Middle School was conducted on March 15, 2001.

The review panel's charge was to analyze data and written information on the school's performance and improvement efforts, visit the school, and meet with school and district officials in order to advise the Commissioner on the answers to the following two key questions:

1. Does the school have a sound plan for improving student performance?
2. Are the conditions in place for the successful implementation of the school's improvement plan?

The panel's responses to the two key questions that defined the scope of their review are included in this report. These findings and conclusions are the product of the panel's analysis, discussion, and observation, based on the evidence available to them. A list of panel members who participated in the Solomon Lewenberg Middle School review is provided in Appendix A. A detailed schedule of the panel's activities is provided in Appendix B.

The panel's findings and conclusions on the two key questions will be forwarded to the Commissioner of Education for consideration, together with school performance data, in determining whether the Solomon Lewenberg Middle School is deemed under-performing. The panel was not asked to formulate a sound plan for school improvement where such a plan does not presently exist, or to recommend a course of action to create the conditions for successful implementation of sound improvement strategies where such conditions at present do not appear to exist. Diagnostic and/or prescriptive intervention, where needed to assist an under-performing school, occurs at the next stage of the school review process.

SOLOMON LEWENBERG MIDDLE SCHOOL PROFILE

The Solomon Lewenberg Middle School is one of 19 Boston middle schools serving students only in grades six through eight. The school enrolled approximately 600 students in 2000, 83 percent of whom were African-American. In that year, 82 percent of the students were eligible for free or reduced-price lunch, and 23 percent spoke a first language other than English. The school identified nearly one in five students (18%) as Limited English Proficient (LEP) in 2000.

In 1999 (the most recent year's data available to the panel), students missed on average 13 days of school, for a daily attendance rate of 93.0 percent. During that same year, the school had a dropout

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rate of less than one percent. In 2000, eight students (1%) received one or more out-of-school suspensions, while the school reported no in-school suspensions or student exclusions. In addition, the school reported that 20 students (3%) were repeating a grade that year.

STAFFING

Lewenberg's middle school students are taught by 46 full-time teachers, four teacher's aides, and two teacher leader/curriculum facilitators for an approximate average pupil-to-teacher ratio of 13 to 1. The central staff consists of Principal Myrtlene M. Mayfield, three assistant principals, one school-wide special education administrator, three guidance counselors, a librarian, and a nurse. Of the 46 full-time teachers, 28 (61%) have attained a master's degree.

MCAS RESULTS

Overall MCAS results showed that 1999 and 2000 scores on average were lower than in 1998. In comparing the 1998 baseline to the 1999 and 2000 average, scores declined by two points in English Language Arts, remained the same in Mathematics, and declined one point in Science & Technology. In 2000, 38 percent scored in the Failing performance level in English Language Arts, 79 percent scored in Failing in Mathematics, and 87 percent scored in Failing in Science & Technology. MCAS participation rates decreased from 96 percent in 1998 to approximately 90 percent in 2000, principally due to declining participation among special education students and LEP students.

PANEL REPONSES TO THE KEY QUESTIONS

KEY QUESTION 1: DOES THE SCHOOL HAVE A SOUND PLAN FOR IMPROVING STUDENT PERFORMANCE?

A. Has the school analyzed appropriate data and program information to accurately identify the gaps in student performance and determined why those gaps exist?

There is a new emphasis, district-wide, on examining data and student work. The school has examined a variety of student performance reports and has begun to analyze it to identify students who need special services. It is at a beginning stage of using data to identify specific areas of student weakness. However, the analysis has stopped short of producing detailed profiles of learning strengths and weaknesses of groups and individual students.

There is some evidence that the school has examined MCAS and Stanford 9 scores as well as results from other assessments such as the Scholastic Reading Inventory (SRI), a locally constructed math test, and writing prompts. The leadership report makes reference to using data from these sources, but the panel saw no evidence of how the school analyzed and interpreted data other than Stanford 9 results. The school is required to address six district-wide "Essentials of Whole School Change." Its progress report on Essential #2, Looking at Student Work and Data, states that data points to "some trends in student learning needs," but it does not explain these trends. Members of the Instructional Leadership Team (ILT) stated that they have been analyzing SRI and Stanford 9 data

to put it in usable form for teachers. However, the panel did not see how that data analysis has taken shape.

The 1999 Stanford 9 Grade Level Skill Analysis report provided to the review panel illustrates the school's beginning steps in data analysis. It indicates what they intend to do in the future with the analysis but does not clarify what the data has told them to date. They disaggregated data by race and articulated a "Smart Goal" in 1999-2000 to decrease the achievement gap on MCAS for racial and ethnic groups by 33%. However, the goal did not elaborate how they intended to do so, and 2000 MCAS data provided by the state shows only small average gains. The report states "faculty may employ this data to design effective classroom strategies and additional support for those students who are not achieving at grade level." However members of the Instructional Leadership Team stated that teachers need assistance determining how to use data. The principal also stated that teachers do not yet understand how assessments can help inform instruction, and teachers indicated they do not use data to plan instruction or analyze data on individual students.

The school has identified a limited number of gaps in student performance, most notably students' weak vocabulary and lack of skill in answering open response questions. They identified some causal factors, e.g. teachers have relied on a narrow definitional approach to teaching vocabulary, and students have had little practice writing open response compositions. This analysis has resulted in school improvement initiatives reflecting some attention to current program information. A more thorough identification of gaps and underlying reasons for those gaps in all areas would assist the school in their planning efforts.

B. Does the plan set out a course of action that is: (1) responsive to the school leader's analysis of the nature and reasons for poor student performance, and (2) is likely to lead to improved student results?

Because the analysis of data is limited, the school has not fully identified the nature and reasons for poor student performance. Although the course of action specified in the plan is based on a general analysis, action steps and program initiatives described in interviews focus on professional development to improve instruction in two areas—Literacy and Math. These efforts are likely to positively affect student performance over time.

Interviews with administration reveal recognition that teachers need to change the way they teach in order to improve student achievement. The school is utilizing numerous strategies to improve classroom instruction. In order to address critically low math scores, the district has begun to phase in the Connected Math series at the middle school level. This program is aligned with the Massachusetts Math Framework and requires students to utilize higher order thinking skills, to actively engage in investigations, and to ask questions for themselves. The school's math specialist has already noticed how the cognitively delayed students with whom she works have improved in their ability to think abstractly. Sixth grade teachers using the program receive ongoing training and support from both the full time building-based math specialist and the district-provided part-time math coach during weekly cluster common planning time as well as during two hour after school workshops monthly.

In the area of literacy, the school has continued to train its teachers using the *Supporting Literacy* professional development model, which incorporates best practices based on research. Eighty per cent of teachers have already completed the 24-hour course, open to both English Language Arts

and content area teachers. The school has a full time literacy specialist and part time literacy coach provided by the district. They model lessons in teachers' classrooms and meet with teachers weekly to hone pedagogical skills in specific areas, such as how to link paragraphs within a research paper or how to use a rubric to assess a piece of writing in a meaningful way.

The strength of these two initiatives lies in the availability of resources (a full time Director of Instruction, Math and Literacy specialists and coaches) provided to teachers for ongoing training. The staff development model provides teachers with demonstrations using targeted strategies, observation of their teaching, feedback, and time for collaboration and reflection. One of these instructional leaders indicated that progress is measurable but slow, and stated that teachers are mostly at an awareness level and not yet incorporating new strategies independently. With greater attention to analysis of data to determine specific areas of weakness and causal factors, the school will be able to better clarify goals, rationales, and specific action plans to improve targeted areas. Teachers, specialists and coaches will also need to track student progress along the way and use those checkpoints to guide future instruction.

C. Was the School Improvement Plan developed through a process that will support its successful implementation?

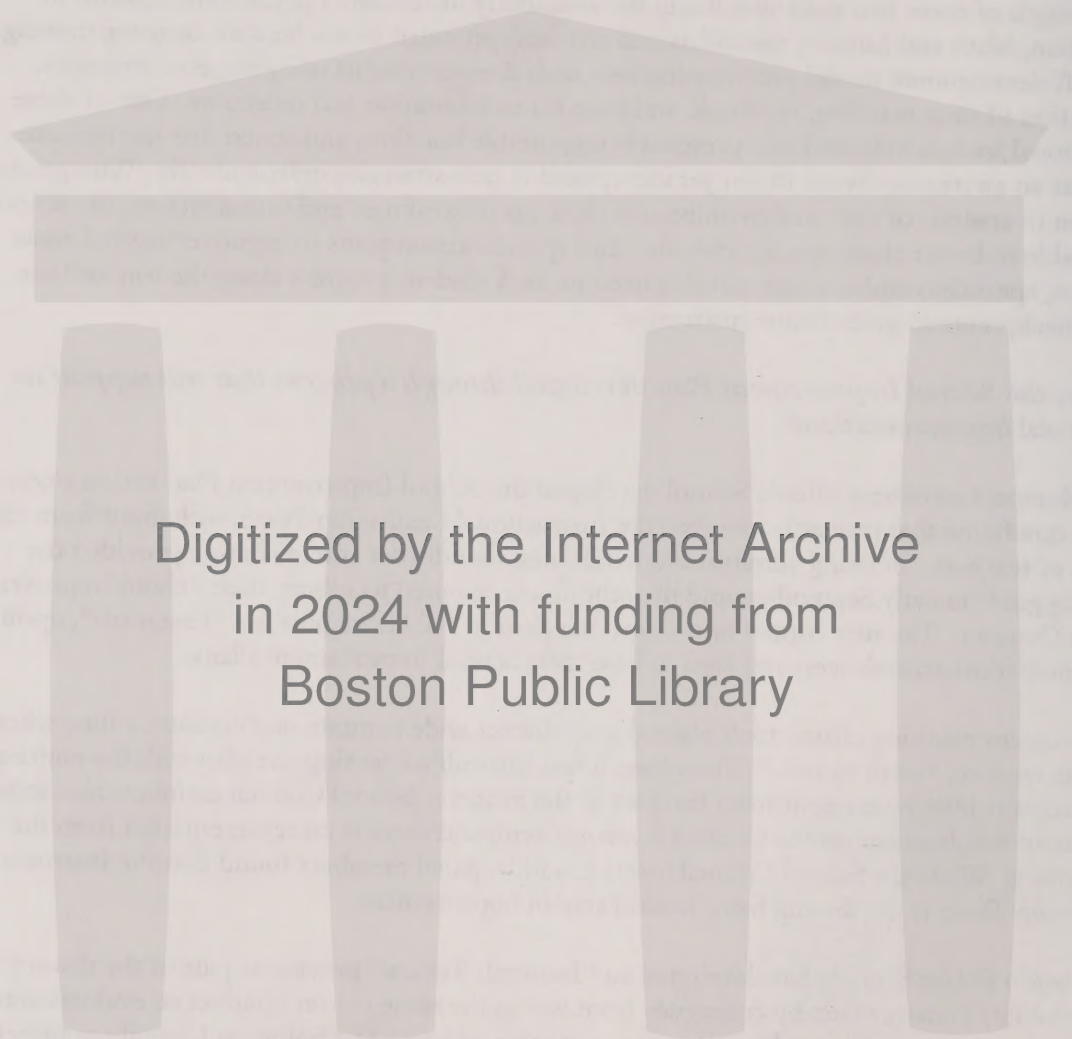
The Solomon Lewenberg Middle School developed the School Improvement Plan within a one-month timeframe that primarily involved the Instructional Leadership Team, with input from cluster groups of teachers. Building administrators indicated that district administration provided the planning guide in early September, and the school was required to submit their School Improvement Plan in October. The new format introduced the Boston Public Schools' six "Essentials", upon which individual schools were required to base their School Improvement Plans.

Improvement planning efforts took place during district-wide contract negotiations, a time when teachers were on "work to rule." Therefore, it was difficult to develop the plan with the entire staff, and there was little investment from teachers in the process. School Council members also indicated that parent involvement on the Council is inconsistent, and there is no representation from the community. While the School Council meets monthly, panel members found that the Instructional Leadership Team is the driving force behind school improvement.

The Boston Public Schools has developed an "In-depth Review" process as part of the district accountability system, whereby colleagues from within the same cluster conduct an evaluation of a school when its principal is in his or her contract renewal year. The Solomon Lewenberg principal indicated that because the school had undergone an internal "In-depth Review" (IDR) last year, she placed all aspects of the 2000-2001 School Improvement Plan in phase one of implementation to start the cycle anew even though some initiatives were ongoing from previous years. One of the findings of the IDR Visiting Team indicated that staff morale is low in terms of involvement in the decision making process in the school. Panel members, however, did not hear evidence of low staff morale.

D. Is the School Improvement Plan document clear and specific?

The School Improvement Plan documents provided by the district include a Whole School Improvement Planning Guide and a template that has space for the succinct clarification of goals, rationale for change/improvement, action steps, personnel responsible for carrying out the action



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steps, and timeline. However, the Solomon Lewenberg Middle School's plan needs to clarify how rationales link to the goals, to outline more specific action steps that match the goals, and to provide a means of evaluation that will monitor progress toward goal attainment.

Several examples illustrate the lack of clarity in the plan. The goals in the first category focus on Essential 1, which highlights instruction and improving student performance. Smart Goal 1A targets a school-wide focus on problem solving strategies and reasoning and communicating mathematically. The stated rationale does not reveal a clear understanding of student weaknesses on the variety of math assessments administered at the school. Furthermore, action steps do not spell out specifically who has to do what. For example, "mathematical literacy will be increased through universal usage of Mathematics vocabulary and word study" does not explain what math vocabulary students need to learn, who will teach it and when. Similarly, the rationale stated for Smart Goal 1B, which emphasizes that all core subject teachers will implement the practice of word study, does not relate back to a thorough analysis of student data revealing specific areas of weakness. Action steps do not clarify what teachers are expected to do to accomplish the goal other than to participate in professional development.

Smart Goal 1C, which specifies that all English Language Arts, Science and Social Studies classes will provide students with the opportunity for targeted independent writing, does not articulate the rationale for a focus on independent writing. It also does not lay out specific action steps that would provide students with instruction in writing to give them guided practice that would then enable them to write independently. Furthermore, evaluation procedures do not clarify how students will get informal feedback on their writing prior to the midyear and final assessments.

Essential 2 focuses the school on using student data and work to guide planning for improvement. The action steps outlined in the School Improvement Plan do not match the goal. They merely specify the assessments being administered by the school (SRI, Math assessment, writing prompts) and do not translate into changed instructional practice. Other goals in the School Improvement Plan reflect a similar lack of clarity with regard to rationale, specific action steps, a means of assessing progress toward the goal, and a meaningful timeline for implementing the action steps.

While the plan mentions the use of numerous programs, the principal has eliminated some, such as Expeditionary Learning and GEAR-UP, because too many programs were diluting the school's focus, and these particular initiatives did not address the district-wide concentration on Math and Literacy. Panel members were encouraged by the principal's efforts to focus the faculty on a simpler plan.

KEY QUESTION 2: ARE THE CONDITIONS IN PLACE FOR THE SUCCESSFUL IMPLEMENTATION OF THE IMPROVEMENT PLAN(S)?

A. Does the school have effective leadership and sound management?

Teachers reported that the administration is open to their questions and issues and interested in collaborating to seek solutions to problems. They described the principal as empowering, and this empowerment was evidenced by the numerous people in the building who assumed specific leadership roles—the assistant principal, director of instruction, math and literacy specialists and coaches, the building-based director of special education, and the L/AB (learning adaptive behavior)

cluster coordinator. They and the Instructional Leadership Team play a significant role in guiding improvement efforts. In addition, the principal has brought in two professors from Lesley University to work with teachers—one to work with social studies teachers on building content knowledge and one who has been working with the ILT in aligning and diversifying curriculum.

The principal shared anecdotes with Panel members that demonstrated the way she balances nudging teachers to improve their instructional practice with supporting them where they are. For example, she communicated that she wanted teachers to design rubrics to evaluate students' writing, but when it was evident that teachers were overwhelmed by the idea, she backed off and decided that they could utilize the rubric provided by the state to evaluate MCAS open response questions. In so doing, she recognized teachers' needs while she also held firm on her expectation that they use a rubric to evaluate writing.

The principal communicated her vision to two Panel members. As she described how she blocks off time in her schedule to visit classrooms for 15-30 minutes each three times a week, she looked up and said, "I would like to see co-teaching going on. That's my dream."

Parents and students reported that the school has a supportive atmosphere and described the principal as nurturing. One student said the principal was like a friend, and indeed interactions she had in the hallway as she monitored movement to and from the lunchroom demonstrated her rapport with students. Students felt safe, and transitions between classes were orderly.

One area of concern mentioned in teacher surveys and parent and teacher interviews was discipline. Staff and parents expressed a desire to have the administrators take a more aggressive role in student behavior issues. Parents also expressed concern that too much time is taken away from teaching and learning due to the disruptive behavior of a few children. The principal was aware of the faculty's claim that they spend a lot of time refocusing and redirecting student behavior and stated that she felt many of the problems would disappear if teachers taught to different learning styles and actively engaged students in the learning process.

B. Is there evidence that the school's faculty supports the planned improvement efforts?

There is evidence that the faculty conceptually supports the improvement efforts. Teachers interviewed indicated that they were consulted about the plan. Moreover, teachers across all curriculum areas, including specialty areas, support writing across the curriculum and incorporate instruction in math and word study into their subject areas. The Instructional Leadership Team stated that some teachers are beginning to incorporate strategies learned in their professional development experiences. Classroom observations and administrator reports reveal that some teachers are beginning to initiate instructional changes in their classrooms. For instance, Panel members observed students working on MCAS prep materials and writing responses to key questions. Word walls, student portfolios, and displays of student work were evident in several classrooms.

The Review Panel heard evidence of collaboration among groups of teachers involved in improvement efforts. For instance, cluster groups meet during common planning time weekly as well as two hours after school once a month. The focus of their efforts this year has been to look at data and student work together, often with the guidance and support of Literacy and Math specialists and coaches. The two Lesley faculty members have convened two inquiry groups—one

has engaged new teachers in exploring effective teaching strategies and expanding content knowledge, and the other has focused on developing strategies for diverse learners. Over the past three years, at least 32 teachers have participated in these inquiry groups.

Interviews with teachers revealed that they are working hard to implement planned improvement efforts. When the Panel asked teachers their role in carrying out School Improvement Plan initiatives, one teacher responded, “We have complete responsibility.” Teachers talked about how they are learning to use data to drive instruction, conducting assessments, using MCAS-like tasks in their classrooms, emphasizing that students respond in full sentences, engaging students in writing daily, and using open-ended response questions across all subject areas.

Faculty Survey responses and teacher interviews yielded a sense of frustration on the part of some faculty members, which led the Review Panel to question the degree of faculty support. Teachers expressed frustration over the lack of uniformity from one school to another with respect to the pacing of curriculum; the lack of needed instructional materials for all students in their classes; and questioned how closely their curriculum is truly aligned with the state frameworks. However, one teacher indicated that there are a few disgruntled teachers who do not feel supported, but they generally do not carry their share of responsibility for school improvement efforts.

C. Is the school receiving adequate guidance and support from the district leadership?

There is mixed evidence of guidance and support from district leadership. On a positive note, the district has provided guidance in the school improvement planning process by focusing the school on six Essentials of Whole School Change. They created an improvement planning guide and a template that requires the school to articulate a goal, rationale for change or improvement, action steps, responsible personnel, a timeline, and means of measuring goal attainment.

The district has made available a wealth of human resources at the Solomon Lewenberg to focus efforts on instruction. District level coaches and full time Math and Literacy specialists in the building are examples of human resource support. The district has also provided new computers and technical support to teachers in the technology area.

District leadership has introduced *Research for Better Teaching* (RBT) training to administrators to expand their knowledge base about effective teaching strategies and use it to give meaningful feedback to teachers. They have also offered RBT courses for new teachers and encourage schools to offer their own RBT courses for their faculty. The district adopted a new math program—Connected Math—at the middle school level and has provided training to teachers as they phase in the curriculum.

Shortcomings cited by teachers and administrators include the inadequate time given to school leadership for school improvement planning. A four to six week time frame, especially under contentious teacher contract negotiation conditions, was insufficient for the school to complete their School Improvement Plan in a thoughtful and inclusive manner.

Teachers also expressed concern about not having enough books for every student in their classes. As a result, students cannot take books home and practice or continue what they have started in class. Teachers stated with dismay that they have not been involved in decisions around the adoption of instructional materials. The new Connected Math program was a case in point. It was

adopted in all middle schools with no choice provided, and Solomon Lewenberg teachers had no involvement in the decision making process.

Teachers and administrators expressed their frustration over large class sizes and the accompanying difficulties they have meeting students' individual needs in large classes. The teacher-pupil ratio, the deputy superintendent admitted, is 30:1 at the middle school level, while the district has made smaller class size a priority in the elementary schools.

CONCLUSION

The existing Lewenberg School Improvement Plan has some elements that partially address the needs of the school. However, it lacks quality and depth due at least in part to the haste with which it was developed and to the incomplete analysis of data to determine gaps in student performance and reasons for those gaps. The panel saw definite momentum toward successfully implementing the improvement plan. The school's focus on looking at data and student work to improve curriculum and instruction is a promising practice, and teachers demonstrate willingness to participate in professional development to enhance their teaching skills. Math and Literacy specialists and coaches, a director of curriculum, and outside consultants provide teachers with ongoing guidance and support and engage them in reflection about their practice. To enhance the likelihood of student improvement at Solomon Lewenberg, the Instructional Leadership Team will need to maintain their focus on school improvement efforts, carefully analyze available data to determine specific areas of weakness, identify causal factors for those weaknesses, plan action steps that specifically address remediation of problem areas, and closely monitor progress towards achievement of their goals.

APPENDIX A Team Members

Dr. Jack Monbouquette, Solomon Lewenberg Panel Coordinator, Consultant, Massachusetts Department of Education, Malden, MA

Dr. Susan Rübel, Solomon Lewenberg Panel Chairperson, Coordinator of the International Network of Principals' Centers at Harvard University, Consultant for School Works, Beverly, MA

Joanna McInnis, Director of Elementary Curriculum – Grades 3-5, Revere, MA

Lorraine A. Plasse, Director of English Language Arts and Library Services/ Coordinator of Teaching and Learning, Springfield, MA

APPENDIX B

Evaluating School Performance

Detailed Schedule for Review Panel School Site Visit

The times specified on the following schedule may be adjusted slightly to align with the daily schedule and practices in each of the schools being reviewed.

Hour	A, B, C, D, and E represent five team members.				
6:30 – 7:00	Travel time to School				
7:00 – 7:30	Panelists meet Principal for orientation to school's programs and tour of the facility				
7:30 – 8:30	Discussion of the school improvement plan with the school principal and the school site council				
	Panelist A	Panelist B	Panelist C	Panelist D	Panelist E
8:30 – 9:15	Teacher Interview	Parent Focus Group		2 Classroom Observations	2 Classroom Observations
9:15 – 10:00	2 Classroom Observations	2 Classroom Observations	2 Classroom Observations	Teacher Focus Group	
10:00 – 10:15	Break for the Panelists				
10:15 – 11:00	Principal Interview		Teacher Interview	Teacher Interview	Teacher Interview
11:00 – 12:00	Teacher Focus Group		Student Focus Group	Student Focus Group	Student Focus Group
12:00 – 1:00	Lunch				
1:00 – 1:30	Review Panel meets with the Superintendent at the school.				
1:30 – 3:00	Review Panel Members will assign individual interviews with school and district leaders (including Principal, faculty representatives, union representatives, school council representatives)				
	Panelist A	Panelist B	Panelist C	Panelist D	Panelist E
3:15 – 6:00	Panelists return to hotel or work at meeting site. All panelists deliberate on key questions and formulate a response.				

Please inform all school faculty and students that Review Panel members will be visiting a cross-section of classrooms during the site visit. The selection of classrooms will be determined mutually by the Panel Review Coordinator and the Principal using the staff directory information provided by the school. All faculty members are asked to be prepared to accommodate a visitor on the morning of the site visit. Panel members will make every effort to minimize the disruption of planned classroom activities.



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APPENDIX B Estimated Annual Production Detailed Schedule for Boston Public Library

The figures reported on the following schedule may be subject to slight change due to the daily estimates and variations in costs of the various items being produced.

Item	Quantity	Unit Price	Total
Books	100	\$1.00	\$100.00
Periodicals	50	\$2.00	\$100.00
Microfilm	25	\$4.00	\$100.00
Audiovisual	10	\$10.00	\$100.00
Reference	5	\$20.00	\$100.00
Children's	3	\$30.00	\$90.00
Special Collections	2	\$45.00	\$90.00
Archives	1	\$90.00	\$90.00
Manuscripts	1	\$90.00	\$90.00
Maps	1	\$90.00	\$90.00
Photographs	1	\$90.00	\$90.00
Other	1	\$90.00	\$90.00
Total	200		\$1,000.00

These figures are based on the best available information and are subject to change. The actual production of the library will be determined by the Board of Trustees and the Library staff. The figures are provided for informational purposes only and are not intended to be used for budgeting or other financial purposes.